tell me a story...
collision
It’s not as easy as it looks.

At least, this is what I discovered during my first semester as Collision’s senior editor. Over the course of the fall, Jen and I spent countless hours holding meetings, making fliers, planning events, sending emails, designing layout and, of course, editing content.

Thankfully, we were supported by an amazing staff. This semester, Collision’s twenty-four staff members faithfully attended Tuesday meetings, nagged promising classmates to submit, and plastered the Cathedral’s walls with illegal fliers. Because of them, Collision received more submissions this fall than it has in the past two years.

I’d also like to thank this issue’s writers. Without their talent none of our efforts would matter.

Enjoy.

Jess Adamiak
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"But hardest are the seeds of the blood fruit.
Their words are so red they enter
only once and desperately at knifepoint.
They believe they are alone in their cardinal
tongue, sanguine and praying.
It would take fire or breaking glass to tell them
the poppy, the apple, the vein."

-Jennifer Oakes

*

Sister Rosemary, my favorite nun, writes in flourished
cursive with a piece of grizzled chalk: Christmas Party Tonight.

I work for the school as a student ambassador, and each
Christmas I don my black blouse, black skirt, black tights, black,
pointed-toe shoes, and that crimson cardigan with the droopy
buttons and silly badge. Patrons come to bid on Christmas trees
and sip champagne until their pocket books turned loose as their
mouths. The more outgoing girls are assigned tea trays and serving
spoons, and the rest of us, like little mice who scamper unseen,
sweep up crumbs in the kitchen or stand in the cloakroom, hanging
and tagging the coats.

Ten-thirty, and I am tired already. Carolers croon in the
hall. Sister Rosemary has come back to her classroom looking for
masking tape to hold up the mistletoe. I smile at the irony, and she
sees me—my shoulders slumped, my punch cup empty, my sweater at rest on the floor. *I am tired of waiting.*

"I have something for you," she grins, approaches my station, closes the door. It is just us now, two celibates smiling. She is nearly sixty, and I have just turned fifteen.

"Every Christmas," says Sister, "I treat myself to one of these." And from her deep pocket she pulls out the strangest fruit I have ever seen: odd-bodied, a colourful, elegant rind. "Do you know what this is?"

I am thinking a gourd or a melon maybe, but I shake my head: "What?"

*Pomegranate.* Suddenly, there is a knife in her hand, and she makes an incision so sharp and skillful I marvel she is only a nun and not a surgeon. The juice squirts everywhere, reminiscent of communion wine or two summers’ past, first blood. Her fingers are dripping with it, slick and red, and she is laughing and licking them, joyful as a schoolgirl with a Popsicle.

She gives me some. "Don’t worry if you spill, dear," Sister Rosemary gleams. "Black hides a multitude of sins."

I put my mouth into the heart of the honeycomb, the dark beads full of sweetness, breaking open under the blade of my tongue.

"This is the only fruit," she says, "that cannot be eaten. You must simply devour it."

*

"Tell me a story," my lover says.

We are lying in bed, our bodies paratactic and pillows propping our heads: a long, smooth symmetry of limbs. The candles have since burnt out. We are comfortable here in the dark.
Tell me a story.

When I was a child, my father took me to Seaside every summer. There was an aquarium there, and in a corner of the place, hardly visible among the dark glass and sparks of swimming silver, a small sign pointed to the ‘Touch Tank.’ It was my favorite place on earth, I thought, as I mounted the little stone steps and stood, my sleeves dangling, my father rolling them up from behind, shifting his large frame and bending, a sturdy tree, toward me. I plunged in my hands. They were fast and darting as minnows, but he held them still and told me—firmly, again—these were living creatures I needed to handle with care. Gently, then, I lifted the purple starfish, and the blazing orange, the textured bone of their bodies and those that were smooth as stone. I touched urchins with grassy spikes and snails withdrawn in shells. But the most beautiful one—where my hands lingered longest, my fingers unwilling to leave—was the soft, pulpy pink sea anemone... so shy, yet she took me into her mouth, clasping the tip of my skin like a hungry wave sweeping up sand. What was I to her, she who could only feel?

I smile, and hearing my lips split, she presses her mouth to mine. I have told nothing: no stories, no lie. Alone in my cardinal tongue.

Now her body leans like a willow, the wave of her breath descends.

“Kiss me,” she says. “Kiss me again.”

* 

“Bless the fingers,
for they are as darting as fire.
Bless the little hairs of the body,
for they are softer than grass.
Bless the hips
for they are cunning beyond all other machinery.
Bless the mouth
for it is the describer.
Bless the tongue
for it is the maker of words.
Bless the eyes
for they are the gifts of the angels,
for they tell the truth.
Bless the shoulders,
for they are a strength and a shelter.
Bless the thumb
for when working it has godly grip.
Bless the feet
for their knuckles and their modesty.
Bless the spine
for it is the whole story.”

* 

I have been in the waiting room forty minutes. A woman in blue scrubs with clipboard is quietly saying my name. “Walk this way,” she instructs, and I follow. The squeak of her sneakers is pain.

They come from all over, descending, zombie-like in their lab coats and fixed, professional smiles. They talk around me, across me, above me. They touch me with their latex hands.

*Can you feel it?* Dr. 1 inquires.

*Yes, right lobe, slightly protruding,* the second doctor replies.

*The nodule is here,* another insists. With his black magic marker he circles the place. The three men confer and then leave.

Now a woman comes. She is young and bright-faced, though her hands spell legends of pain. “We’ll do our best to make you comfortable,” she says, fluffing a pillow and patting a space on

From Mary Oliver’s *The Leaf and the Cloud.*
the long, narrow plank of a board.

"I'm going to ask you to lay down and unbutton the top of your blouse. Put your head back and tilt your neck up toward the camera. Each picture takes about 5 minutes during which time you must remain absolutely still. There will be one-minute breaks between pictures during which time you can relax but must remain in a horizontal position. The bed will be raised five feet off the ground, and you will slide through into the center of the machine. Please keep your hands close to your body, palms pressed inward against your thighs. This is to ensure your safety throughout the duration of the test. Do you have any questions?"

I shake my head and lay down. They could have called it *coffin, casket, crematory stove.* They could have called it anything but *bed.*

*

My mother's body is a grave, a hungry tomb of stories. They leave without a trace, her thick veins sprouting through the surface of her skin—maps that lead to nowhere, no place I could ever find again. Tonsils disappeared with adenoids; then appendix, spleen; wisdom teeth and gall bladder to follow. The doctor teased: *Everything you can live without.* I shared the womb with tumors the size of ping-pong balls. They grew to golf balls; in the end—a soft ball clenched inside a catcher's mitt, soggy with sweat and blood. A man with latex hands pulled me safely through the chute, darkness into light and rushing water. He reached back; his instruments gleamed precision. With a suture and a short knife, he cut away the story of my birth.

"Do you miss them?" I ask. The question comes suddenly and without antecedent. We share a counter-space, my mother and I, chopping vegetables for the Fourth of July picnic.
“Miss what?” Tense, perturbed, she wishes I would concentrate on what I’m doing.

“Your reproductive organs.” I have learned their names, can mark the diagram in health class, each word spelled correctly by my awkward, cursive hand. But before she can answer: “What is it like inside? Is it empty? What fills up the space where your uterus used to be?”

Her eyes turn watery, then wild. Offended, perplexed, unsure how to answer, she stands thinking about it a long time. Then quietly, uncharacteristically: “Not empty,” she says, wiping her hands. “It’s like taking off your apron after the meal is over.”

*

In Mrs. Du Pen’s biology class, a prescience: brooding on my own death, lab partner sick, learning the kingdoms of life as if I did not belong to one. And after class, cleaning crucibles, brushing chalk-dust from my pants, I beg to know: how did she trust in anything when death was in the molecules we breathed, the light we squinted through, stories traded like baseball cards at the end of a busy season?

“Exactly!” she smiles, chocolate eyes, sympathetic and wise. “We are such a precarious species, balanced on the precipice of time. Sooner or later, we all fall off, that’s certain. I was going to be a philosophy major in school, but then I thought, Carolyn, you’ll just depress yourself.” She lifts the exoskeleton of a horseshoe crab, ten millions years old, spends a minute polishing his shell. “Everyone was here,” she insists, “even if we don’t remember.”

*
Must we eat alone at the table of our hearts forever?

*

This time, in the shower: rushing water, darkness into light. A towel on the radiator is warm; I wrap it around you. Glistening and drying in the muted light, you ask, and I tell you a story.

I guess it's no secret—I've always loved sea creatures: the elegance of the snail treading along, the patience of the clam in hiding. One morning in my high school biology class Mrs. Du Pen announced we were going to dissect squid.

You raise an eyebrow at me—brown arch over cornflower blue.

No, it's true. She gave us each a paper plate with a squid on it, laid out like a sacred scroll (the tentacles dangling), and then a plastic knife with which to split it open. The body was soft and spread willingly. We studied the diagram to make sure it matched our design. The squid has a spine, if you didn't know—a flimsy creature, but a bone like a straw runs the length of its back. We slipped it out, and with the sharp point at the tip, punctured the ink sac—its blue bubble burst—and signed in cursive our names.

You are not convinced so I must tell you again and again how beautiful it was—to write something at that moment, something commemorative in honor of the body we each must shed. I run my fingers through your wet hair (tentacles dangling).

“What happened next?” Your voice uncertain, inviting redemption. “Tell me the truth.”

My mouth close to your ear as I say it: We fired the stove and cooked calamari, enough for three classes to eat.

*

Shivering on the table in a gauzy dress, I am anything but elegant. My knees unhinge, snapping like shells. She turns a
flashlight to the long highway home through my blood.

"This is your first time?" she inquires. I nod, rustling the sheet, suddenly speechless in the static-bright light of the room.

"All right, now, just try to relax. It may hurt a little at first..." A latex hand, a smooth stab: sensation of breaking glass. She is scraping my cells, spinning them like cotton candy with the wick of her probe. I study the ceiling, which sags with the weight of my tears.

"Your mother has a history of the disease, is that right? Detected in her early twenties?"

"Yes," wincing, my breaths short and warm. "She had cancer when I was born."

"And do you know what kind of cancer, specifically, she had?"

We are done now. I watch her gloved hand peel back its skin, jaundiced to talcum-white. "Uterine, ovarian—they took out everything," I say. And then I imagine it—that dark, open land I almost remember, Nebraska of wide fields and howling winds. I was the last to see it alive. Now nothing will grow there. Nothing will grow there ever again.

*

* 

* 

Each day I begin, blank as an uncut key.

* 

One night you went out, and I wondered where you had gone. When you returned, you carried a brown paper bag and placed it under my side of the bed. "In the morning," you said. "In the morning, you may open it."
The morning was my birthday.

Twenty-three years old: my fingers still giddy to open, unwrap. I part the clenched lips of the bag. I plunge in my hands. *I am far too tired of waiting.*

"I remembered," you say, "that night you told me the story."

"Which story?" *So many, like seeds.*

A soft light seeps into the room. Cathedral of feathers: sea gulls clutter the eves. Here in my palm, dazzling—the fat, round fruit, red-skinned and wonderful.

"Sister Rosemary and the Christmas party..." lifting it out of my hands. You slice right to the center, eyes trained: *desperately at knifepoint.*
I am thirty-five millimeters of melted plastic
   salt crystals and pigs' hooves, my insides
reeking of thick black lubricants and burned

       fingers. Out of my eyes and nostrils come
beams of light and hot metals, and from my mouth
       comes light and rusty ghosts.

Do you know a thing about scope
       and flat, about how I've shrunk two feet
and gained three hundred pounds?

       Sit down and shut up. I thread my gut with paper-
thin microscopic frames of people
       I don't know. I blink and watch them

fight and make love and do everything
       I can't because I am constantly feeding
out and taking up, uncoiling and recoiling until

       I finally slip off the track and wrap myself
around myself and break in two, spilling
       my fibers into nests on the floor. Lace me
up and look at the ghosts in focus inside
my eyes, the flat, the intangible, the fading
monsters of light and silver particles.
Autumn’s End:
Premonitions of Family Winter
by Erin Lawley

The green, oily husk makes the sound of stretching plastic, but it doesn’t budge. The brown, flossy stuff at the end is connected to the other side of the ear, as well. I knew that — trying to reach the center on the first yank never works. But, on this Saturday afternoon in late August, it’s the first time I’ve husked corn all summer. I peel away an outer layer and let it fall into the open garbage bag in the driveway.

The miscalculation takes only seconds. But it means I haven’t even exposed the tiny, white kernels at the ear’s tip before I lose the chance to direct conversation.

“Does she seem more depressed to you than normal?”

I drag my thumb nail down the spaces between each row, trying to catch the last of the silvery hair that would wrap around our teeth later. His pudgy fingers struggle with the same task.

“She’s been extra mean to me lately. More than usual.”

I feel him looking at my eyelids. I try to hook a single strand of floss with a cross-row approach, using the smaller nail of my pinky.

“Nothing suits her. I thought building this house would make her happy. All she’s talked about for years is how she wanted a new house. But it’s just given her more things to complain about and get mad at me for.” His voice is a getting close to a whine, like
a pig that’s misplaced its mother and is just beginning to realize it.

“Everything’s always my fault, you know? It’s *my* fault that we don’t have all the furniture we need yet. It’s *my* fault that the grass hasn’t started coming in. It’s *my* fault that the pool isn’t big enough. But whenever I try to get her to sit down to pick furniture or talk about how to fix a problem, do you think she will? She just gets all huffy and walks off or calls me stupid or something.

“I don’t know what to do, and I’m sick of being nice and trying to cater to her.”

Nine ears left. I wish I’d decided to make a frozen pizza.

I strip the side of an ear in one, violent jerk and say that maybe she just needs to get adjusted. She probably feels overwhelmed with the changes of moving and taking care of a bigger home in a new town. Or something.

“I can’t do this much longer. She won’t talk to me and she won’t go talk to a doctor, alone or with me. I figure I have a good 25 years left.” (I protest; he’s only 51.) “I don’t want to spend them like this. If things don’t change soon, if she doesn’t do something to prove that she cares about this marriage, I’m getting a divorce.”

I pause, wait for it, but nothing happens. Dry eyes. Stillness in my ribcage.

Lucidity. “You’re right, dad. If you’re not happy and mom’s not willing to try, you should just drop her.” The last bit of husk flutters into the garbage bag.

* 

When I wake my face is slimy and cool with the residue of sleep. I rub the sleeve of my roomy high-school soccer sweatshirt across my cheek and along the corner of my open mouth to remove the wetness and any forming crusties.

I guess it’s about 6:45 a.m. by the way the chandelier in the
middle of the cathedral ceiling glows in the light peeking through the curtains. It casts oblique rays of filtered yellow on the light green of the empty walls. The soft glimmer makes the events of the previous afternoon seem distant and the day before me brighter than the cold, shadowy hours I’ve become accustomed to in the last few months.

In this moment, with everything motionless and bright, life doesn’t seem to be rocketing out of my control; my family isn’t some galactic star burst with fragments flying beyond my grasp, where I can’t pull them together, fasten them down, and make it ok. No. This feels good.

I take a deep, nasal breath and splay my arms as if they could reach the ends of my overstuffed comforter, gently cracking the silence.

Because of work, class, and being four hours away from home during the plan-and-build phases of this house, I barely had a chance to imagine what my mother would concoct for my bedroom. But even with years to speculate, I wouldn’t have come up with this. What she gave me is by far the best room in the house. In its position on the north-facing facade, at the top of what, from the outside of the building, looks like a tower, it would be more fitting to call it a “bed chamber” than a bedroom.

And it feels more like “me” than I could have designed myself.

Just being, existing in this space makes me feel properly oriented in the world. The overstuffed bed puffs out its chest from a curving but unpretentious wrought iron frame. The chandelier beckons the eye to the high ceiling, at once showy and understated, suspended from the center of a delicate, hand-painted molding. The white sheer and lace window treatments that brush the white
carpeted floor, the low-sitting arm chairs and round, book-shelved coffee table, arranged for tea time in a semi-circle at the crux of the bay windows — it all comes together to feel meticulous yet simple, classic, casual and quiet. It’s orderly and controlled in its coordination, but the appearance of the final product hides the labored structure behind the look of an elegant whole. It’s all the things I might have abstracted from my personality if I could see myself as she does, from the outside with a view to the core. In this space, I feel her love. If I didn’t know first-hand, I would never believe that the house containing it was a labor of some very opposite emotions.

My parents began to plan the house during my sophomore year of college; it was completed a year and a half later. Yet, it has existed so much longer — an oppressive weight bearing down on us, wedged between them, for almost ten years.

By the time I was in middle school, our old house, built by my mother’s father’s contracting and construction company the year I was born, was “falling apart.” The dishwasher was always being fixed — the leak flowing across the chipped kitchen tile was seeping onto the carpet that runs from the doorway of the garage into the house, an area lightly stained from efforts to remove two generations of dog urine. My brother, two years my senior, accidentally knocked some paneling off the door that leads from the garage to its exterior, leaving a paintless hole to match the one where the paneling had simply warped and fallen off. Jill, my elder sister by eight years, had backed her Jetta into the garage door a few months prior, the dent still visible. And the washing machine broke. For the tenth, fifteenth, eighteenth time mom found our clothes sitting in its hull, which was full of water that refused to drain.
She cried.

To me. To no one in particular: Everything in the house is falling apart; we need new carpet; the dogs are ruining the couches in the living room by jumping up on them and ripping at the upholstery; how is she supposed to keep the house running when the appliances are breaking down all the time?

Dad strides into the room. Black suit, patterned silk tie, briefcase, fatigue crumpled across his forehead. He’s standing near the puddle in the doorway. “There’s nothing wrong with this house. Every house needs repairs — this is a beautiful home.”

Mom lifts and thwacks down a piece of steak that had been thawing on the cutting board. “You don’t see it because you’re never here. You’re at work while I have to look at all the filth, all the things that are broken or breaking. Why can’t we just build a new house? No one should have to live like this.”

“There’s nothing wrong with this house.” He walks past the dining room table, en route to his bedroom to change before grilling the steaks.

He knows it. Building a new house isn’t going to fix what’s really falling apart.

But a few years later, when he finally agrees to it, it’s because he wants, just as much as she does, to pretend that it will. Then they wouldn’t have to think about anything bigger than closet dimensions and bathroom fixtures. Paint colors, not relationship problems.

Of course, I’m not thinking about any of this after I unwrap myself from the heavy down and smooth, lavender sheets, a sensation like being released from my mother’s warm embrace. As I’m shuffling down the slightly spiraled staircase, the chill of my father’s affection for air conditioning penetrates the fading soccer
ball on my sweatshirt. I retract my hands into the sleeves as I enter
the kitchen. I’m wondering if I should turn around and look for a
pair of slippers. Will I remember which cabinet holds the coffee
maker?

Thus occupied when I enter the kitchen, it takes a few
seconds to compute the scene before me.

Mom is snatching white porcelain plates from the
dishwasher and banging them into a pile in her hand-painted
cabinets. Dee Dee, the puppy she got a month before, is hopping
around her calves, trying to lick the silverware she hasn’t yet
unloaded. Mom stumbles over her on a return trip to the
dishwasher. She yelps something. I hear the tears.

She spots me.

Too early in morning to devise appropriate strategy.

My mind tries to race. Do I tackle it head on and hope it
doesn’t cause hysterics — Hey are you OK? Do I offer to alleviate
some of the stress of the situation while trying to avoid the ranting
explanation of the real problem — Morning mom, need some help? I can
hold Dee Dee while you finish up. Do I use humor to evade whatever
has her crying before 7 a.m.— Hey mom, God, I love that bed! Could
you just have my mail forwarded there? Do I try to be so standoffish that
she doesn’t want to talk to me — Where’s the coffee pot? I just want
coffee, the newspaper, and silence.

I can’t decide and she’s still looking at me.

I notice the coffee pot on the counter behind her and it
throws me off. By the time I open my mouth she’s already talking.

“I’m so sick and tired of this. I’m trapped in this damn
house all day” (Slam of the last plate and cabinet door.) “and
nobody gives a damn about any of the shit that needs done around
here but me. Nobody cares that this place is constantly a mess. I’m
constantly cleaning up after everyone. We don’t have any furniture yet. There is work that needs done in the yard here and at old house or it’s never going to be sold, the way it looks.” (Crash of the silverware drawer being slammed into place.) “And do you think your father will help me? All he does is come home from work and sleep, or complain about aches and pains from the one time he tries to help me trim the shrubbery. Nope, it all falls on my shoulders.”

She looks like a distressed child as she throws dishes from the sink into the top rack of the dishwasher. Her 5’7” frame is thin and wiry from her constant state of motion. Agitated, frustrated motion. She uses a flat iron on her hair now, like me, and when it flops around at her chin in these flurries, it makes her almost girlish. Trivial and tragic.

Particles of food splash from last night’s dessert bowls onto the open dishwasher door. Dee Dee dives for them. Mom shoves her, sending the knot of energy skittering across the hardwood floor. “And I can’t do anything with this dog constantly after me like a child! She has to be watched at all times, and then everyone leaves to do their own thing and leaves me here to make sure she’s not eating curtains or chewing on chair legs. How am I supposed to do all this? I can’t handle everything by myself. We should’ve stayed in Halifax. This is worse than before. I’m so miserable. I think my hair is starting to fall out — ”

“Mom!” I finally interject.

My head is ringing. It’s too early for this. Really, all I wanted was some coffee, the newspaper, to sit Indian-style in the cozy chairs at the table in the breakfast nook, to drag the feeling of my bed through the kitchen and into the rest of the day. I had planned to jump on her with a hug and a kiss in thanks for my drool-refreshed sleep. Now I feel my shoulders knotting up, my
stomach hardening — my body’s face-saving response to the tense, emotional hell being played out in this house. My internal walls rise and lock into place. All the feelings, the sadness and helplessness of my family’s disintegration and my self-hate at not being able to stop it, are safely barricaded until I’m alone.

But I still have to say or do *something*.

Why hadn’t I taken notes on every other time we’d had this conversation? Or rather, every other time she’d had this conversation at me? What did I say the times I got her to calm down? Had I ever gotten her to calm down? Sometimes I hugged her, but I think that just made me cry, too, further extending the hysterics session. Sometimes I tried to sympathize and mirror her feelings back to her, just let her vent. I think that worked once or twice. Sometimes I tried to reason with her — tell her that she wanted to get the puppy and she shouldn’t feel bad about putting her in a crate; tell her that dad has to go to work so we can eat and have this house, and he should be allowed to nap a little; tell her that she’s using the house and dog as excuses to bitch and complain. Well, I never said bitch and complain. But she freaked out anyway, regardless of the phraseology.

I walk toward her, resolved to hug her, when the door from the garage opens and dad walks in. He’s carrying the newspaper and a bag full of bagels from a nearby bakery. My mouth starts to curve into a smile, but it stops in a grimace.

“Jesus, Barb. What’s wrong now?”

Her head jolts up, hair flaps back, eyes narrow, squeezing out a few more crocodiles. “Oh what do you care? It’s never your fault anyway.”

The room seems to wrap up in a thick, metallic cord, held painfully taught between their eyes. All matter — the hand-
painted grapevine border on the ceiling, the decorative window above the sink, the stainless-steel freezer and refrigerator unit — is magnetized to that one ray, tangled and twisted, gnarled and jagged. Not a move by him to embrace her for comfort, not a flinch by her to ask for it.

I was a freshman in high school the last time I remember seeing them kiss.

It was a Friday evening in the fall. I know it was fall because I was wearing the “away” jersey of a friend on the football team in preparation for that night’s home game, and dad looked like a road cone in the blaze orange turtle neck and camouflage that marked his departure for a weekend hunting trip.

Sitting at the dining room table, I watched him, leather rifle case slung casually over his shoulder, as he pulled my mother in for a quick, goodbye peck in front of the door. Tall and frail, she let her spine curve to his thick arms. For a moment it was like a scene in an old movie where the man, going off to battle, brusquely pulls his woman in for a passionate goodbye kiss. Strong and manly in his uniform, he put both of his big hands on her tiny waist and drew her in so that she seemed even smaller, malleable in his hands.

But she wasn’t wearing a full skirt or sporting a head full of perfectly styled curls, and there was no passionate, black-and-white-movie kiss. At the last moment she turned her head sharply so his round face smushed into her cheek. Her bony fingers patted his back in an impatient flurry, an obvious attempt to cover up the fact that she did not share his feelings. She was averting her eyes across the room. After ten pats or so she pushed away. She didn’t smile or kiss him back. She never even made eye contact.

I think he sighed before turning to leave.

Had they touched since then? Had they felt any sort
of attraction toward each other — physical, emotional, mental, anything? I can't recall more than the casual contact you might experience when living with anyone for an extended period of time, like a hand on a shoulder to guide someone out of your way. Had our world been twisting itself up between them even before that day — tightening and tightening until moments like this one, when the universe is poised for another big-bang with a black-hole void to follow?

That's what I envision as I watch them staring each other down — the world splitting, a dark unknown visible in the fissure.

I have to leave before the break becomes visible in me, before a wall cracks and I overflow. Not that either of them are looking at or thinking about me. Neither one notices when I retreat to the tower.
Lifeline
by Adrienne Biondo

Elizabeth City, North Carolina, the cackle
of Edith Piaf’s voice on a 45 we listen
to while I fondle a delicate Lladro you
purchased in Barcelona.
I pretend to hold a flower basket and flutter
my eyes like the wings on your Norwegian butterfly
brooch, so beautiful I want to steal it.

Tomorrow, you take me to see Wayne Newton’s old house,
feign excitement at the decay
of paint on wood, the leprosy
of an idol I can’t remember.
Someone’s building a pool in his front yard, you
tell me. But I think it’s a large
bowl for lots of goldfish.

Tonight, you show me the life
line on your palm, stretching from five
thick fingers to a snowshoe in Minnesota,
across the Baltic to an army base in the Philippines,
to a German city I can’t pronounce. Rounding the globe
with a line stretching wider than your birth
canal after passing four children, farther
than my pink tongue when I catch snowflakes
on winter solstice in the cul-de-sac of Elizabeth City.

Now, you are young on a motorcycle
wearing white slacks painted in mud
from a dirty flight across town, across the ocean,
across the wide expansive smile on your face
that knows the secret behind Edith's sorrow,
the smell of porcelain flowers picked fresh in a basket,
the color of Wayne Newton's shutters before a hailstorm.

Next morning, before I leave Elizabeth City,
I steal your eyes, nose and mouth
and never give them back.
Out Into
by Claire Donato

Caliban, July July, the light
illuminating the dust illuminating
the air; red. There is heat, there is
gold, there is sweat beading on

the blade of her shoulder. Wooden
doorframe, Pittsburgh chapbooks,

Tchaikovsky humming dust & Crazy
Love on a bookshelf,

red gold brown chalk & ob,
the smell of new books on

her hands is a thrift store, her
father's office bookshelf.
I've heard rumors of an era when American writers were a self-cultivated species. To be a burgeoning writer on a college campus most likely meant that you majored in English and lured potential sex partners with stirring recitations of Homer or Keats. You sometimes jumped up on restaurant tables and declaimed your own verse (to the mixed embarrassment and joy of your friends), but you also took long walks alone at odd hours, from which you would return hungry. You hair would be mussed and you'd rattle through the house looking for food, making too much noise, behaving as if you didn't know how late it had become.

Now college and writing add up differently. One needn't bother so much with English—it's just a lot of musty books and difficult continental language philosophers anyway. One can go straight to the core of the matter and major in creative writing. Why not? That's what I did. And I did it at one of the nation's oldest and proudest undergraduate writing departments. The program I attended had its very bright spots, but it is also as full of frat boys imitating Chuck Palahniuk and watery young women penning metered suicide notes as any other writing department in
the country.

What makes majoring in creative writing radically different from majoring in any other humanities department—say, history or French, is the amount you learn about your fellow students.

Sit next to Susan in The American Civil War or French II, and you might realize that her views on the antebellum South are tinged with nostalgic racism or that she is very bad at conjugating in the future perfect. Sit next to Susan in Beginning Poetry Workshop and you will not escape learning about her weirdly erotic feelings for her older brother (“The athlete of my flesh / marred with mud”), her age-inappropriate fascination with unicorns (“opalescent beings shake stardust / over the last magic beast”), or her creepy over-reliance on alliteration (“My brother placed his pointed / finger on my pouting, puffy lips”).

This amount of excess knowledge about your peers leads to the rapid crystallization of intimate bonds and to deep repulsions, but it mostly leads to boredom. Since creative writing is your major, you will meet many, many Susans. They will all blur together in your mind, a chorus of messy humanity and unsatisfactory line breaks. You, yourself, will be a Susan. Oh, yes. First you will resist it—you have dignity and restraint, you’ll try to be discrete and elusive in your writing: at least, you’ll change names! Then one night with a pressing deadline and an unresponsive muse, it happens to you, too. You lose your fictionalizing energy and the truth of you, or at least your deluded imagination of the truth of you, gurgles out. You turn it in undisguised to your professor, you distribute copies of it to the class because you’ve got nothing else and you don’t want to flunk (who flunks creative writing?! The very name of the subject already sounds remedial).

Then when time comes to workshop your shameless
autobiographizing, you notice an odd and potent thrill. Four of your classmates are arguing about the merits of phrases you used to describe your kinky bondage sex with your ex-boyfriend. Except your classmates aren’t saying, “Carolyn expresses this,” or “Carolyn thinks such-and-such,” they’re saying, “The speaker thinks this,” and “The speaker seems to enjoy blindfolds.”

Oh, that devilish “speaker”! That beautiful bit of workshop etiquette, that sublime joke made possible by privileging point-of-view as an issue of craft. That speaker and her wanton desire, her depraved, murderous mind! I could listen to people talk about my “speaker” all day. It’s not so much exhibitionism as it is inside-out-voyeurism: watching other people watch you watching yourself. Wild.

Seen prosaically, a creative writing workshop is not always so much a class as it is a bizarrely catty group therapy session. It is easy to look at a workshop this way; a bunch of late adolescents whining and posturing, squabbling over word choice. But it may be more revealing about this generation and this time in America to see things in a more epic light.

At the workshop tables of our writing programs, some of the most fiendishly arrayed and elaborately cultivated young egos that one may ask to see on this earth are crossing lances on the battleground of language. Issues of what constitutes a poem and what makes a story and who is qualified to make stories and poems are at stake. Theoretically, this is a democratic, even nurturing process. More often, despite a professor’s best efforts, it is a despotic and hierarchical struggle. The wisest voices often grow soft and withdraw, while the most strident, stuck, and ambitious play on at great volume and length.

At the workshop tables it is possible to deliver eviscerating
criticism in an even, reasoned tone of voice to a young man whom you do not like only because of the unfashionable t-shirts he wears. By using this tone of voice you may compel others, even your professor, to concur with your harsh assessment, simply because you sound so sure and calm and no one else seems to have thought about the matter as much as you.

It is also possible to suck the last marrow of praise from the bones of your peers during the delectable moment when you’ve just been workshopped and your professor asks if you have any other questions the class can answer for you before we move on.

“Oh—“ the trick is to sound as if you hadn’t already anticipated the question, as if you had forgotten it was part of the ritual. “Just the last paragraph on page four,” you indicate, knowing full well it is the most scrupulous, entertaining prose you’ve written all semester, “I tried something new there. I was wondering if people thought it worked?”

I know it is possible to do these things, of course, because I have done them many times over. But it is not so strange in the scheme of history that we young egos want to battle over language or draw out and belittle one another’s dearest dreams. What is strange is that we wish to do this on monitored and refereed ground, with a veneer of distance and civility. We wish to perform our bloody maneuvers before the eyes of a professional observer. We want our critical thoughts repeatedly validated. If we’ve written something brilliant, we want a respected older writer to tell us just how brilliant we are. If others write poorly, we wish to see them punished so a community standard may be set which we can rise to meet. For in truth, being a writer now in America is too scary to attempt without these reassurances and rules. Writing is lonely,
time-consuming, and almost fatally unprofitable.

I know that the dual yearnings for cultural and financial capital eat up much of my middle class mind with their conflicting demands. The role of the writer is heavy with the first kind of capital, yet almost bare of the later. The climate in the country today favors the glory of financial above cultural capital, and so to chose to be a writer is to stake out a territory of ambition that is both highly contested and widely jeered.

I am a naturally idealistic and zealous person. If I did not like sex so much (with my older brother, hand-cuffed, in a gimp mask, behind the unicorn’s castle), I would probably become a nun. So the airy gleam of the writer’s cultural wealth won the attention of my avarice over the baser, more glutinous stuff which fills the coffers of people who major in business and take jobs as investment bankers.

Much of the work of being a creative writing major lies in assuring yourself and those around you who share your vulnerable position that it is okay, even desirable, to treasure cultural over financial capital. You will easily look down on kids in other departments who don’t occupy the same arrogant yet down-trodden place on the cultural scale as you. You will rally round with your fellow majors at student readings and cheer for your friends. You will be an avid participant in smoky, late night discussions of sestina composition strategies. But even as you applaud and snap, even as you roll your next limp cigarette, you will always be dimly and graspingly aware of your need to prove that these things are good, even superior things to do.

Towards the end of your career as a creative writing major the readings and the smoking and the talking may all begin to sadden and disgust you. The problem will not be so much that you
have ceased to like writing: the problem will be — as you will learn from the lurch of your stomach when the news meets you that your former friends in the department have published twice this month in national journals while you, talentless you, have placed nothing nowhere — the lurch of your stomach specifically lets you know your former friends were busily writing while you were busily screwing them over — this will be the problem. The problem is that your greed for cultural capital is every bit as consuming and ugly as the greed for money which you disdain. It mars your relationship both to other people and to your work.

The problem will be that you have graduated with a degree in creative writing, but you have nursed in yourself a venom and a hunger for recognition that have the potential to make you vile and unsuitable human company. The problem will be that this venom and hunger are all you have left to write about.
Prayer for the Unfinished
by Amanda James

Pray for the unfinished,
when the finish is reached
too soon. You must get on your knees,
if you are not there already. Say
your goodbyes. Make your apologies.
Now, open one palm slowly.
Imagine a sea of gray, where the depths
are gray, and the expanse
is gray, and even the whitecaps
are gray, as you pray
for the unfinished. Mouth
the beginnings of sounds
like a child attempting to speak
for the first time. Make the shape
of the $M$ over and over. One $M$
for myth. One $M$
for misery. One $M$ for mortal.
One $M$ for mystery. Your final
$M$ must always be for maybe,
as is custom in the prayer
for the unfinished.
Close your palm
as though you are holding
a handful of sand, and-
as you bring your hand to your heart,
imagine what you are holding.
Now imagine
what you are not. Learn to carry
what is in between
as you pray
for the unfinished, when
the finish
is reached
too soon.
I Return to the Hills
by Katie Kurtzman

The first time I looked at death, I buried it under a pile of stones. I was five and I stood in my uncle’s long drive way staring at a dead robin. It was a female with a dull copper feathered breast and slightly open beak. I poked it with a pointy rock. It laid there stiff and hollow. I didn’t want to look at it anymore so I carried it to the end of the drive way to a pile of gravel. I scooped out some rocks and laid the silent robin in the small abyss. I covered it with gray stones and walked away.

rocks

Reality is a sound, you have to tune in to it not just keep yelling.

-Anne Carson

There is a different kind of music to the day in the country hills. It is not still nor is it silent. My dad hammers a broken tin roof in the back yard. Metal on metal shatters the hour. Black serious and slow cows moan to each other and to the stranger standing on their property with deep low sounds coming from the bottom of their souls. Crows cat call the air and the clouds. There is a distant sound of cars humming down the windy long stretches of worn down asphalt. I have to stop all movement and clear my
head to listen. It is only me and the music of Virginian hills for a moment...for as long as I can hold no other thoughts in my head.

I return to Hillsville after a four year separation. I am overwhelmed by how much things have changed. The past haunts the present here even with the land always being altered by industry, truck stops, and new cell phone towers. The pavement and metallic monsters crawl through the blue hills and dark woods. However, Hillsville gracefully still cradles the past as best as it can while new arrives in every direction. Ghosts stroll the streets, climb the hills, and watch from old house windows as life continues around them. I think about this and suck in my breath as I peer into the dimly lit den where my beautiful silver haired Aunt Nicky and once sturdy Uncle Brooks sit all day staring out the window at their land.

*and here’s to silent certainly mountains…*

-E.E. Cummings

The sun is strong and radiant today. It blinds me and I cover my eyes with a saluted hand. I stare out at the uneven hills that meet at corners and ridges. Each hill shares space and grass and movement. The black cows amble up the sloped landscape beyond the electric fence that has frightened me since I was four years old. The old gray house looks smaller to me now as it sits in the field unused by people anymore. Everything looks smaller. The wind is hay, manure, and mountains. My lungs celebrate. I
remember running the hilly pastures with my sisters and climbing the ancient crab apple tree. We used to dangle upside down like vines from its bony branches until the blood rushed to our heads and our skin wrinkled up on our foreheads. I can’t go in to see my family yet. So I wander the Beasley homestead; my second home.

*I meditate upon a swallow’s flight,*

*Upon an aged woman and her house*

*-W.B. Yeats*

I am leaving America for six months to study and be with my other family in Belfast, Northern Ireland. My Aunt Nicky and Uncle Brooks might die while I am away. They are aging like the land they have lived on their entire lives. I whisper these words. I am afraid of them. My mom will be here in Hillsville if it happens. I will not. While I’m in Belfast, my great aunts and uncles there might pass away. I will be there with them. My mom will not.

So I make the journey to Hillsville this Thanksgiving break just as my mom’s heart knows she needs to cross the Atlantic Ocean this spring. We both make different journeys to do the same thing. I am not used to this type of heart preparation. I return to Virginia to say a pre-meditated goodbye and an unsure farewell. I touch Aunt Nicky and Uncle Brooks more this time. I feel their loose worn skin under my calloused young hands. I make my pilgrimage to the yellowed November hills and gray barns. I need to be here before something final happens. It hits me: left side, below the collarbone. I feel my great aunt’s angular and thin
body hug me. I don’t fear death. I fear missed conversations and embraces.

There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

-Graham Greene

Behind the brick rancher are three old crumbling wooden sheds. They used to be attached to the old homestead house that sits squat in the fields as storage for hay. Once, it was the home for a family of twelve. My great aunts, uncles, and grandfather were raised there. No one dares tear it down. So it will sit on top of the hill, on the Beasley land, and watch as its people come and go. I walk to the old sheds. My dad is kneeling on the top of one repairing the tin roof. Uncle Brooks can’t do things like that anymore. Instead, he sits in his easy chair and helps his wife move through the house with her walker. He is now an old man with gray hair on the sides of his balding head. He still has his chiseled handsome features and delightful smile full of tobacco juice stained teeth. I say hi to my dad and push open the door of the shed. I am walking into forbidden territory. Never, have I been allowed to be in here. I was told as a child that it was dangerous because of all the tools and old farm equipment kept in it. I only saw the dark insides from the small hole near the door where the farm cats enter. Even then I could only see a rusty rake or a tin can in the dim lighting. Now, I walk in and view the unseen from my childhood. Hatchets, hoes, rakes, and a tiller are stacked on top of
each other in the small space. Cans of nails, screws, and odds and ends from a once working farm lie around on makeshift wooden tables. Bottles that I know my mom would love line the thin, cloudy, glass paned windows. I feel odd seeing this all for the first time. It's hard for me to see these worn out tools no longer put to use. They are remnants of a young farmer; a time when chickens were kept in the hen house, sausage was made from hogs kept on the farm, and vegetables were thriving in the once neatly planted rows. I take a rusty nail from a can and place it in my pocket.

I've been living so long with my pictures of you that I almost believe that the pictures are all I can feel.

-The Cure

I have a camera filled with black and white film. I want to capture what I've known since I was seven. I want my eyes to see it all the same way. I believe the film will do this. Everything is clear and natural here—like breathing and placing one foot in front of the other. I pull my uncle's warm black down feather vest tighter around me and set out down the long driveway to the barn. It's gray like most buildings in this part of the country and it's ugly and beautiful. Like most things on the farm, it isn't used now. It stands there like an old soldier waiting to be revived. Virginian pine trees stand tall and stately on the other side of the road and a lone black cow blows hot air out of its nostrils only five feet away from me. I am still and gaze around. When I am here, I think about breathing. I notice the air go in and out of me. I don't do this any where else. The air has more life in it here. I look into the view finder on
my camera and see the barn through the thick plastic. Snap. The image is mine forever.

_Couldn’t feel better: I’m together with my Dixieland Delight._

_-Alabama_

Inside, I sit next to Aunt Nicky and hold her long slender fingers in my own. She is the only grandmother I have ever known. Aunt Nicky is the foundation in this family. She is like the land. She has watched her parents, every sibling, and even her own daughter die before her eyes. They have disappeared while she goes on. However, she doesn’t do much now. Her farm doesn’t produce. Her husband can’t hear her. She sits in her chair. Neither the television nor the radio is on. She doesn’t read books or knit. She stares and waits. It’s a sign of depression. I wonder if Uncle Brooks and her even talk or if it is almost possible to do so without shouting at him because his hearing has almost diminished. Her leg hurts so she doesn’t try to walk much and I grimace and hold back tears as I hear her cry when my dad lifts her up out of the chair to attempt the walk to the kitchen table. She is too fragile for me to bear.

Her body is crumbling. But her mind is sharp. She does not forget anything or anyone. She can name every family who has ever lived in these hills and can easily recall a moment from her past. She tells me stories about what my third cousins are up to and who’s getting married and who’s having babies. She asks me about college. When she talks she rests her fingertips on the
side of her chin. She is an aging Indian woman. Her raven black hair is now silver. Her tan taut skin is now pale and wrinkled. But her proud nose and long lean face are still strong and prominent. My Aunt Nicky is still beautiful. I look at her and ask if I can take her picture. She slyly smiles without showing teeth and her cheeks tighten up to her ears. She cocks her curly silver head to the side. Her throat slopes down to meet a jutting collarbone hiding behind a button down blouse. She looks back at me with hazel eyes through round glasses while I peer through my lens. She is happy I’m paying so much attention to her.

My Aunt Nicky is 83. She is elegant. She is part of the mountains. This is Hillsville. These are Southern women.

When I was a little girl, my Aunt Nicky was always in the kitchen. She constantly filled our stomachs and our souls with biscuits and pies. She moved around the kitchen easily grabbing pot handles and stirring gravy while I sat at the wooden table and watched her. Her hands were always moving. If she wasn’t cooking, she was canning vegetables and fruits, or sewing. My Aunt Nicky used to do needlepoint. She made little pin cushion pillows for gifts that had intricate knotted designs. I used them as pillows for my dolls. Her hands are still now. They rest in her lap.

Aunt Nicky has never left this farm. She was the youngest of all her siblings and was given the farm after her father passed away. She married her best friend, Brooks, who lived on the other side of the hill. She could see his house from her back window while they were courting. I imagine my quiet sturdy Uncle Brooks walking up the hill with a handful of pasture flowers. I can picture
them sitting on the front porch, looking out over the mountains and knowing that one day they will make a home together on the very land they gaze upon. They have made their home. They still sit here together and look out over their hills and their trees.

_God pours life into death and death into life without a drop being spilled._

_-Author Unknown_

The parlor is a reminder of a time of grace. A thick oriental rug lines the wooden floor. Flowered upholstered plump sofa and chairs are arranged around mahogany end tables covered in framed pictures and antique statues and figurines. I sit down and look at the books lying on the oval coffee table. I pick up the volume on the Cemeteries of Hillsville. It is a thick book with a faded maroon cover. Inside are all the family plots in the county with names and dates. Death is important here. A cemetery is like a monumental family tree. Decorate and defend your past loved ones and the grass they sleep under.

In the hall way is a large portrait of a “Southern Belle.” She sits upright and elegant in her lacy white dress. Her dainty hands are clasped together and she looks at me with a coy teasing smile like she has since I was a little girl. I always stop and look back at her, as if I’m trying to find myself in her chestnut eyes.

_World is suddener than we fancy it._

_-Louis Macneice_
Belfast beckons me. The city opens up to me like a solemn yet comforting invitation. Its grand lapping bay is a reminder that the world does exist beyond the grey green hills that surround the city like a fortress. My Irish family waits. I see my grandmother in each of her sister’s faces and I know that it is right for me to be there. But I will be with them and not with my Aunt Nicky. My mother will be with my Aunt Nicky but not with her Aunt Dot, Beadie, and Rosie. We will switch places and then pine for the other.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

-Theodore Roethke

When I was eight years old, my Great Aunt Daisy died. Up until her death, I had spent spring days rolling down her back hill with cousins and sleeping in her attic bedroom with both of my sisters and I sharing one quilted bed. Grape Ne-hi pop was bought at the store around the corner for fifty cents. My Aunt Daisy had dark eyebrows and dark gray hair that looked like cigar ashes. She had a scratchy slow voice. On her coffee table was a blue glass bowl filled with colored glass balls. This is how I remember her. Her funeral is the first one I remember. Everyone cried. I sat in my Easter dress by my mom in a wooden pew. And then we visited the Beasley cemetery that I knew so well. They put my Aunt Daisy in the ground. She became part of the grass. Aunt Daisy was my Aunt Nicky’s last sibling to fade. I only remember my Aunt Nicky
preparing food in her kitchen overlooking the hills after the funeral. Nothing was final for me. I broke free from my mother’s grasp and ran out to the pasture to chase cows with third cousins.

*Perhaps my best years are gone... but I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now.*

-Samuel Beckett

Thanksgiving is over. My younger sisters, Colleen and Laura, sit at the kitchen table eating cold turkey sandwiches and deviled eggs. Fluffy, the calico cat tip toes along the wooden back deck railings. I look at the wall beside the sink. A little blackboard hangs there. On it is written in faded white chalk, “We Love You! Xoxo Love, Katie Colleen and Laura.” My signature is elementary school aged. We wrote that when we were little girls and no one has erased it. My Aunt Nicky hasn’t let anyone. Some things don’t change. Staring at the small blackboard I feel caught between my ten year old self and my present age. I think it is ok.

My dad packs the trunk of the blue Camry. I walk through the house and cry. Death and life, old and new, all share a place in this brick rancher, on these saffron sage hills. I don’t want to leave. But I leave.

My Aunt Nicky begins to cry. She holds on to each of us for not long enough. My throat tightens up and I have to turn around and face the window. Uncle Brooks tells me to stay awhile. I respond but I don’t think he hears me. My mom kisses Aunt
Nicky’s face and her tears. We walk outside into the brisk cold November air. I look back and see my aunt and uncle sitting there and staring out the window at us. I want to run back in and make them both stand up and dance. But I can’t. And they can’t. So we drive away.

We pass the family cemetery. It is evening and the setting sun veils the tombstones.

Forgetting Someone

Forgetting someone is like
Forgetting to turn off the light in the back yard
So it stays lit all the next day.

But then it’s the light
That makes you remember.

-Yehuda Amichai
On Saturday

Staff Writing
Saturdays with Dad
by Robin Florentin (1st place)

On Saturday Dad waits to turn off the TV at one o’clock to the chagrin of his four kids. Smoldering in the basement below with his acoustic guitar, his monstrous Soloflex, and his conspicuously hidden pornography videos, he hears every collision between brother and sister, every bodyslam, every ring of the bell on WWF Superstars followed by every cheer of his children and their thunderous footfalls. Though the whirr of his stationary bike is audible over the fanatical TV commentary shouting from above him, he complains about the noise. After the program ends he marches up a flight, drenched in sweat, to demand one hour of quiet reading to make up for destructive ruckus, breathlessness and bloodied noses. To one of us, he hastily hands Moby Dick, to another The Count of Monte Cristo. The whirr continues over frustrated silence and page-turning.

On Saturday Dad parades us into the Aerostar and guns it up the mountain. The van is bursting with bikes and basketballs, frozen pizzas and ‘fridge foods. He plays cassette tapes of Paraguayan folk music and emits a sturdy baritone, singing songs about lost loves along with the ragged recordings. At the townhouse in Hidden Valley, Dad teaches and re-teaches us military-style bed making and the fundamentals of the “envelope fold” at each corner, inserting dry, wrinkled hands and manicured nails into the pocket of the fold to tuck the excess sheet under the
mattress. He instigates torturous hikes and frenzied calisthenics by day, wondering why his kids desperately sprint for the door when they return to the house. He retires at sunset to his OB-Gyn trade magazines—“light reading.”

On Saturday Dad pools his life savings and purchases The Mansion—a place for four brats to initiate an indoor mini-golf course instead of appreciating skylights and balconies. He collects sneakers of all shapes and colors, keeps them meticulously scrubbed, and mumbles to himself about “me ole’ futbol days.” He keeps a cavalry of mini bottles of aftershave on his bathroom sink, English Leather at the command. Dad takes coffee and peanut butter toast over the trade mags while he stares out the screen door in the kitchen, past the wrap-around porch and into thick woods, wondering. He decorates the home with wooden carvings of vaqueros on farms and burros on the till, large leather thrones, and more guitars. He brings us Fox’s Pizza—“The Big Daddy”—and turns on the hockey game. “BASTA!” Dad roars at the new big-screen, swearing in Spanish after every penalty. “Did you see that?!?” He falls asleep five minutes into the third period, dulce de leche dessert smeared on a china plate on his lap.

On Saturday Dad hides somewhere while we move out with Mom—the dim hospital lounge in the OB maybe where admiring nurses will console him, unless he’s opted for the quiet, reflective ambiance in Hidden Valley’s perpetual fog. His bedroom—his side of the bed—a lonely mountain of sneakers, paperbacks, and the clothing tags he uses as bookmarks—Polo, Starter, BOSS. He leaves us a note in his graceful, trademark calligraphy with one of his favorite fountain pens that bled through countless baskets of laundry. We imagine he is somewhere tuning out his anguish and turning up the History Channel; he is gorging on the Snickers bars
he hordes. With flawless script in peacock blue ink, he calls the boys, my brothers, Musketeers—I am his D’Artagnan. He didn’t want us to see him weep, he writes, so he weeps on paper.

These Saturdays Dad is present as an occasional, lyrical e-mail: a commentary about happenings in Paraguay—the home he missed since military school—where at last he returns after forty years of surgery and siring. What remains of him in the States includes a dormant Pontiac, taxes, and four young adults—he can’t remember their exact ages. He muses that we should have had a dog long ago (he would have named him Sam), that he wishes he had more autumn photographs from Pennsylvania (“especially the Poconos, where God hides Eden”), and that he doesn’t know when he’ll visit again. He loses his bifocals in a downpour while jogging. He administers medicine to his ailing parents, each nearing age one-hundred. He orders small pizzas for delivery, and he eats them alone, throwing away the crusts.
On Saturday mornings, she would play Chopin. She would sit in front of her walnut Baby Grand and tell herself an Upright Wurlitzer wasn’t good enough. Not for her. *You need a Baby Grand to play the Tristesse,* she would say.

And she would move the piano when her husband wanted his desk by the window. Eighteen years of fingerprints would give the walnut wood its character. It would be cluttered with empty picture frames and lavender votive candles and, occasionally, an opal angel statue. And the stiff petals of the dead bouquet would lodge themselves between the keys. But there was never a need for a metronome.

With French manicured nails and freshly dyed blonde hair that covered the grays she didn’t have, she would sit in front of her walnut Baby Grand and teach. For 32 years, she would explain allegretto and introduce staccato and tell her students, *use your dynamics.* And they would sit next to her with slouched backs and sleepy fingers and pretend to play music. She could always tell who practiced and who didn’t.

And she would let them know.
Then she would play for them. Prelude in C Sharp Minor, Op. 45. Ballade in G Minor, Op. 23. The Tristesse. They would be jealous and want to play like her. They would try again…

But, now, there is no more Chopin on Saturday mornings. Now she owns a tea room by the river.
Normal is fcked – he
sd to my turned back
because i never face
him –

the windows r
clouded with your
breath again & i
can’t breathe

in this heat, shld i
stop asking for
air, because the trees
r just as empty as
me, he sd

i shaved my head
today & the air
is coolr – now.
On Saturday
by Shana Kraynak

I live in cardigan
smiles of stitches
and buttons
and dots of gun
powder
framed by earthworm-hot
chocolate smells of sunlight
and cold breezes

the dancing pallet
of crimson trees and desires,
blow in
and blow out
and whither and sew
leaves into the blanket
of grassy mud, of glassy
stems of instant cabbage bloom
umbrellas, dripping rain and pico
de gayo on my jagged shards
of hair.
The grateful man strides with a heavy chest and light feet.

On Monday, four members of the Third Squadron, Third Armored Calvary Regiment based in Fort Collins, Colorado, are killed when an explosive device detonated near their patrol. In an explosion, Baghdad shrapnel forms a cruel imitation of the jagged mounts of Colorado’s Rocky range; the men caught in between, an unfortunate casualty in the creative process. Thousands of miles from Lansing, Michigan, or Lucedale, Mississippi, or East Islip, New York, or Las Cruces, New Mexico, there is a place where four good men, honorable and true, took their final breath, likely praying for an end to the pain – an end to lost brothers and bloodshed.

On Tuesday, two men experience the massive cruelty of similar circumstances, a Twilight Zone-reality. The Corporal from Denver, 19, wounded from an improvisational explosive device, falling so far away from the same peaks and valley yesterday’s casualties knew so well. At Camp Pendleton, California, the beloved Corporal must have taken in the most unusual of teenage activities – instead of frequenting the In-N-Out and Dodgers
games under pale blue spring skies, there was the daily regiment of discipline. The other: a Sergeant from Florida, 35. Imagine him a quiet leader, a man whose subjects fear only to distrust, with common wisdom and the intimate knowledge of presence. The Sergeant’s battle concluded in Fort Sam, Houston, Texas, via Samarra, Iraq. Another anonymous explosion takes a leader of men from the waking world, an ocean and a continent away. I wonder if his last image was that of himself or his cause, his country, his roots sunken deep into the fertile, rich soil of devotion beyond human understanding.

On Wednesday, a quiet storm is gathering pressure. Nobody is lost. Nobody is found.

On Thursday, the headstones are an incredible sight to behold—a collective of perfectly white stones, lined together with the attention to order and discipline that the deceased they represent held closely to their chests like a new mother cradles a child. The Tomb is a representation of cleansing—the gleam of the white marble facing shines against the sun and sparkles in the shadow of the Hudson River bank. Today, in the searing heat of western Iraq, two soldiers are killed, identities concealed. In the northern section of Arlington National Cemetery, the Tomb of the Unknown is embodied with yet even more symbolic sadness. The images on the face of the Tomb invoke the ideals of peace, victory, and valor. Valor leads to victory. Victory leads to peace.

Unknown soldiers make blessed heroes.

On Friday, we celebrate Veterans Day. The ideals of the
occasion are simple – the celebration of the efforts and sacrifices that the American servicemen and women have donated so greatly and so willingly in the face of incredible circumstances. America’s economy of life is halted, but the march of submission is never-ending. In Iraq, two Third Corps Support Command soldiers are killed, and two others are injured in a vehicular accident while performing a combat logistical patrol northwest of Kirkuk at about 6:15am.

Before we celebrate the past, it is wise to acknowledge the present...

Staff Sergeant Brian L. Freeman, 27, of Lucedale, Mississippi
First Lieutenant Justin S. Smith, 28, of Lansing, Michigan
Private Mario A. Reyes, 19, of Las Cruces, New Mexico
Lance Corporal Jeremy P. Tamburello, 19, of Denver, Colorado
Sergeant First Class Alwyn C. Cashe, 35, of Oviedo, Florida
Two unknown soldiers, Second Marine Division
Two unknown soldiers, Third Corps Support Command
One unknown Marine, Operation Steel Curtain

On Saturday, I walk freely around the city, keeping my hands in my pockets. A blue scarf from my girlfriend arrests the November wind’s brisk sting against my exposed neck. My sister, walking in close proximity, moans about her future endeavors into love and studies, and, of course, our enjoyment of Chinese noodles after the sun drips behind the landscape, to rise again on the other side of the world.
The burden on my chest, heavy; my feet, lighter than air.
On Saturday morning, I awoke: thin beams of light piercing through the blinds, onto my forehead.

The city is already pulsing with life and noticing this I sit away from the commotion, at a table awkwardly removed from the rest. The waiter does not come. I begin to read last Thursday’s city paper: an article on the August exodus to the isles, a review of last week’s flamenco musical: Los Tarantos. I light a cigarette: three left. The waiter comes:

“Yeah.”
“İced coffee, lots of milk,” I say, without looking up.

I watch him walking away, seemingly attractive from behind. I hadn’t realized the music until now, his body mysteriously moving to Porcelain.

I think about checking my email: my roommate detached, my french ex-infatuation, their monotonous letters. Fuck it.

I get the iced coffee. “Thanks.” His eyes are clear blue. His skin
“Can you pay now?”
“Yeah.”

It’s easier this way, for me and for him.
I drink half the coffee, I’ve been here six months before I get up and go.

There is an English bookshop bordering Monastiraki square. I think about going there, but decide on aimless walking instead.

soon, I’ll be away from all of this

it neither frightens nor consoles me

I walk past endless rows of people dining outside, never mind that its midday and hot. I watch them: light, careless conversation engulfing me.

Suddenly, a break in the row: a pleasingly dimly-lit alley, sheets hung to dry above.

I slip inside;

nobody notices.

I am practically gone.
The Writers
Adrienne Biondo is a junior undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh, where she is currently working on her B.A. in English Writing and English Literature. Adrienne was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, and has spent most of her life in Hershey, Pennsylvania eating chocolate. She currently lives in Pittsburgh.

Claire Donato is a sophomore English Writing and Urban Studies major at Pitt. She lives near Whole Foods with a few flatmates and her blossoming, domestic houseplant named Dick. This is her second Collision publication.

Carolyn Elliott majored in Creative Writing as an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University. She admits that she actually got a little more out of that experience than one lousy essay. Carolyn is currently a pre-doctoral student in English literature at Pitt. This summer she won the Rose Kurhan Shapiro Poetry Prize from Florida Atlantic University. Her short comedy, “Casual Encounter,” was recently produced in downtown Pittsburgh as part of the Future Ten New Plays Festival.

Amanda Rose Phoebe James was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of The Valley School of Ligonier and Greensburg-Salem High School. She is currently an undergraduate writing major at the University of Pittsburgh.

Katie T. Kurtzman is a senior English Writing major at Pitt. She writes for Pitt Magazine and interned with Creative Nonfiction. She adores all things Irish and plans to return to her family and friends in Belfast to continue writing and drinking pints of
Magners Cider in the pubs. However, she will one day come home to “return to the hills” of Virginia.

Since she was a child, Erin Lawley has been in love with language and the ways that it can be manipulated to create an intimate experience for the reader. As of January, with the loving support of her family, she will be starting a career in journalism as a staff reporter for the Nashville Business Journal in Nashville, TN.

Ian Riggins is a third-year Film Studies and English Writing Major at the University of Pittsburgh. He was born and raised in northern Virginia. He is currently working on a screenplay and just finished his first poetry chapbook, Projectorhead.

Julie Marie Wade was born in Seattle in 1979. After completing a Master of Arts in English in 2003, she moved to Pittsburgh where she works in Social and Decision Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University and will complete a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry at the University of Pittsburgh in Spring 2006. She has published poetry and lyric essays in Another Chicago Magazine, Gulf Coast Journal of Literature and Fine Art, The King’s English: Journal of Long Prose, Diner, Third Coast, The Cimarron Review, Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf, and Off the Rocks: A Journal of Queer Memoir. In 2005, she received the Oscar Wilde Poetry Prize from Gival Press and is scheduled to present with Mark Doty on a poets-as-nonfiction-writers panel at the 2006 AWP conference in Austin, Texas.
Submission Guidelines

CONTENT

Send us your personal essays and narratives, travel pieces, profiles, and poems. Art and photography are also welcome.

PRIZES

The top three nonfiction submissions will win $150, $100, and $50.

GUIDELINES

Writers must be current undergraduate or graduate students. Each piece should be under 3,000 words.

To submit, email nonfiction to collide@pitt.edu year round. Please include your name, contact information, sources (if applicable), and a brief bio.

www.collision.honorscollege.pitt.edu
Music

Here. Next Semester.
Adrienne Biondo
Jennifer Brown
Jennifer Dean
Claire Donato
Carolyn Elliott
Robin Florentin
Amanda James
Shana Kraynak
Katie Kurtzman
Erin Lawley
Aaron Morrissey
Ian Riggins
Lena Saltos
Julie Wade